Unmaking as Refusal: Destruction, Care, and the Ethics of Institutional Devotion

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Abstract

What does it mean to destroy rather than preserve? And who decides which forms of unmaking count as violence, carelessness, or crime? This essay argues that artistic destruction—particularly practices such as Gustav Metzger's auto-destructive art, performance-based unmaking, and acts of iconoclasm—can operate as a form of devotion: an ethical attention to what dominant institutions demand be protected, stabilized, and made permanent. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, affect theory, and cultural criminology, the paper reframes destruction not as nihilism or loss, but as a refusal to "follow suit" within regimes of preservation, heritage, and aesthetic order. Through close engagement with auto-destructive art, performance works that stage vulnerability and disappearance, and contemporary acts of monument toppling, this essay traces how unmaking functions as a counter-aesthetic to neoliberal modes of care that prioritize comfort, continuity, and visual coherence. Destruction here becomes communicative: a way of exposing the violences concealed by smooth surfaces, curated memory, and moralized notions of cultural value. In refusing preservation as an unquestioned good, these practices insist on rupture as a mode of ethical relation. Destruction emerges not as the opposite of care, but as one of its most radical expressions; an act of fidelity to histories, bodies, and truths that cannot survive intact.

Biography

Juniper Todd (she/they) is a Master's student in Sociology at Carleton University. Her research sits at the intersection of art theory, cultural criminology, and political aesthetics, exploring how destruction functions as an act of ethical attention and resistance under neoliberalism. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, affect theory, and visual culture, their work examines the relationship between art, power, and moral order. Beyond academia, she is an artist and writer interested in ruin, devotion, and aesthetic transgression.

I. Introduction: The Paradox of Devotion and Destruction

Art is one of the most volatile forms of human expression because it depends on interpretation. It raises persistent questions about authority and meaning: who decides what counts as art, what beauty is acceptable, or what critique is permissible?[1] Encounters with art can provoke discomfort, dissonance, and uncertainty, forcing viewers to confront assumptions about value, taste, and legitimacy.[2] At times, that confrontation becomes violent.[3] In 1986, Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III* was slashed by a viewer who insisted the work "was not art."[4] The attack was not merely vandalism but a declaration: a refusal of ambiguity, expertise, and interpretive openness. Such incidents suggest that destruction emerges not only from hostility but also from deeper anxieties about meaning, authority, and control. Yet destruction is not always reducible to nihilism or negation. It can also function as a form of attention: a gesture directed toward what institutions demand be protected, stabilized, and made permanent. In this essay, I argue that artistic destruction can operate as a devotional practice—an ethical attentiveness to the histories, institutions, and aesthetic regimes that insist upon preservation. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, affect theory, and cultural criminology, I reframe acts of unmaking not as senseless loss but as forms of ethical engagement.

Feminist care theory is crucial here because it expands care beyond sentiment, treating it instead as political attentiveness and responsibility.[5] Affect theory further shows how attachment to stability, happiness, and coherence can sustain harmful systems, making refusal an ethical practice rather than mere negativity.[6] German philosopher and critical legal theorist Walter Benjamin's destructive character provides a final bridge: destruction is not chaos but clearing, the removal of what must end so that something else may emerge.[7] Within

[1] Howard Becker, "Art Worlds and Collective Activity," in *Art Worlds* (University of California Press, 1982), 1-40; Howard Becker, "Conventions," in *Art Worlds* (University of California Press, 1982), 41-68.

[2] John Manfredi, "Art as a Socially Constrained Pursuit," in *The Social Limits of Art* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 19-32; John Manfredi, introduction to *The Social Limits of Art* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 1-7.

[3] Dario Gamboni, "Theories and Methods," in *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (Yale University Press, 1997), 12-20; Dario Gamboni, introduction to *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (Yale University Press, 1997), 8-11.

[4] Rhiannon Piper, "The Vandalism of Barnett Newman's Painting," Rhiannon Piper Conservation, August 23, 2024, https://www.rhiannonpiper.com/articles/the-vandalism-of-barnett-newmans-paintings-an-analysis-of-destruction-and-restoration.

[5] Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1993), 1-63; Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 1-217.

[6] Sara Ahmed, "Introduction: Why Happiness, Why Now?," in *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010) 1-20; Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys," in *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010) 50-87; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 1-21.

[7] Walter Benjamin, *The Destructive Character* (Frankfurter Zeitung, 1931), 1-3.

cultural criminology, this logic resonates with the way damage, traces, and disorder become legible as signs of conflict, control, and suppressed histories.[8] Destruction, then, is not simply the opposite of care. Under certain conditions, it may be one of its most radical forms.

II. Theoretical Framework

II.I Aesthetics of Ruin: Destruction as Revelation

If American criminologist and co-founder of cultural criminology, Jeff Ferrell's, artist works within the living city, Walter Benjamin's destructive character moves within its ruins.[9] Ferrell's "artist" refers to figures such as graffiti writers and urban vandals whose practices blur the boundary between crime and creative expression, transforming city surfaces into sites of meaning-making and contestation.[10] Benjamin's "destructive character," by contrast, is not a literal figure but a conceptual one: a subject who clears away what exists in order to expose its instability, refusing attachment to permanence or preservation.[11] Both figures share an ethics of perception: a capacity to read meaning in decay, to recognize disorder not as failure but as revelation. In Benjamin's aesthetic philosophy, destruction is never mere negation. It is the condition of renewal, a necessary clearing that exposes the sedimented truths of history.[12] The ruin is therefore not simply a site of despair, but of knowledge: a structure that testifies to impermanence and to the violences concealed by preservation itself. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin develops the ruin as an allegorical form. Unlike the classical symbol, which promises unity and transcendence, allegory dwells in fragmentation, exhaustion, and historical decay.[13] Truth does not appear in perfection, but in the broken object, the exhausted surface, the fragment that remains. "In the ruin," Benjamin writes, "history has physically merged into the setting."[14] Ruin is thus not the erasure of meaning but its exposure. It makes visible the instability of all forms that claim permanence. Benjamin's ruin is also a form of profane illumination: a secular revelation in which fragments testify without offering redemption.[15] In this sense, destruction can be understood

[8] Jeff Ferrell, introduction to *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality* (Garland Publishing, 1993), 3-19.

[9] Benjamin, *The Destructive Character*, 1-3; Ferrell, introduction to *Crimes of Style*, 3-19.

[10] Ferrell, introduction to *Crimes of Style*, 3-19.

[11] Benjamin, *The Destructive Character*, 1-3.

[12] Benjamin, *The Destructive Character*, 1-3; Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohan (Schocken Books, 1969), 1-26; Walter Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (Harvard University Press, 2019), 165-261.

[13] Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," 165-261.

[14] Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," 177.

[15] Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," 165-261.

as a kind of devotional attention—an ethical encounter with what cannot or should not be restored.

This understanding of ruin resonates strongly with cultural criminology, concerned with the aesthetics of crime, the performative dimensions of transgression, and the affective and sensory experience of disorder.[16] Like the crime scene, the ruin is an archive of disappearance: a site where truth is assembled from traces, fragments, and aftermaths. Destruction becomes forensic, but not only in the juridical sense. It is also aesthetic and political, transforming debris into meaning. Yet where Benjamin reads damage as revelation, the state often reads it as threat. This reversal is captured powerfully in American political scientist and public administration theorist, James Wilson, and American criminologist, George Kelling's, "Broken Windows" thesis, which treats visible disorder—graffiti, decay, litter, broken glass—not as testimony to underlying histories but as evidence of moral decline requiring intervention.[17] Within this framework, the politics of appearance becomes the politics of order. Ruin no longer reveals history's violence; it becomes a target for policing, beautification, and removal. The fragment that once testified becomes waste. Policing thus acts as a curatorial practice, preserving the city's surface as whole, clean, and legible even at the cost of erasing the truths that damaged surfaces might disclose.

If Benjamin finds revelation in ruins, Andreas Huyssen, a German-American academic and professor, warns that late modernity turns that revelation into commodity. In *Present Pasts*, Huyssen argues that contemporary culture is marked by both an obsession with memory and an acceleration of forgetting.[18] Ruins, memorials, archives, and preserved traces become central to public culture, yet they are increasingly aestheticized, sanitized, and packaged for consumption.[19] The ruin becomes nostalgic décor: a melancholic object emptied of its critical force and re-coded as cultural prestige. Against Benjamin's ethical ruin, Huyssen offers the managed ruin, the curated fragment that soothes rather than unsettles. This is especially visible in urban redevelopment, where "heritage" preservation often masks the destruction of living memory through gentrification and displacement.[20] Destruction remains central, but its meaning is controlled. The appearance of care—restoration, commemoration, preservation—can conceal deeper practices of erasure.

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[16] Ferrell, introduction to *Crimes of Style*, 3-19; Keith Hayward and Mike Presdee, "Opening the Lens: Cultural Criminology and the Image," in *Framing Crime: Cultural Criminology and the Image* (Routledge, 2010), 1-16.

[17] George Kelling and James Wilson, "Broken Windows," The Atlantic, March 1982, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1982/03/broken-windows/304465/.

[18] Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 11-29.

[19] Eileen Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (Routledge, 1992), 1-215.

[20] Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," 11-29.

Sharon Zukin, an American professor of sociology with specializations in modern urban life, and David Harvey, a British-American academic with scholarship on Marxist analyses of urban geography, extend this critique into the political economy of urban space.[21] For Zukin, ruin, grit, and "authenticity" become aesthetic languages through which cities regulate class, race, and memory.[22] For Harvey, ruin is not merely residue but policy: capitalism mobilizes cycles of "creative destruction" to reorganize space, legitimate erasure, and reproduce inequality.[23] Together, they illustrate how destruction can be repackaged as care, revitalization, or improvement while concealing displacement and control.

This tension between revelation and spectacle also structures American writer and critic Susan Sontag's reflections on destruction and representation. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag cautions that images of suffering can easily become objects of aesthetic pleasure or moral consumption.[24] To look at destruction is never innocent. The challenge is not simply to witness, but to do so without turning ruin into spectacle. For Sontag, destruction must be approached as an ethical encounter rather than an aestheticized image.[25] Her argument is crucial here because it insists that devotion to truth requires resisting beauty's consolations. To remain before the wound without consuming it is itself a form of care.

Dario Gamboni, a Swiss art historian, and Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher focused on political theory, ontology, aesthetics, and literature, return destruction to its communicative and ethical core.[26] Gamboni argues that iconoclasm and vandalism are not simply acts of barbarism but forms of speech: gestures that reveal as much about the society that condemns them as about the destroyed object itself.[27] The category of "vandalism" is ideological, drawing a line between legitimate and illegitimate destruction according to the priorities of power. Agamben, similarly, asks what remains when destruction exceeds representation. His figure of the "remnant" names not what survives intact, but the fragment that continues to testify precisely because it is incomplete.[28] In both accounts, destruction is not the end of meaning but its persistence through absence.

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[21] Sharon Zukin, "Living Local in the East Village," in *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 95-122; David Harvey, "Spaces of Hope," *Capital & Class* 24, no. 3 (2000): 238-239.

[22] Zukin, "Living Local in the East Village," 95-122.

[23] Harvey, "Spaces of Hope," 238-239.

[24] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picador, 2003), 1-131.

[25] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 1-131.

[26] Gamboni, introduction to *The Destruction of Art,* 9-12; Gamboni, "Theories and Methods," 13-24; Giorgio Agamben, "The Witness," in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Zone Books, 2002), 15-39.

[27] Gamboni, introduction to the *Destruction of Art*, 9-12; Gamboni, "Theories and Methods," 13-24.

[28] Agamben, "The Witness," 15-39.

Taken together, these thinkers show that the ruin is never stable. It oscillates between revelation and fetish, testimony and spectacle, ethical witness and aesthetic control. Within cultural criminology, this instability mirrors the tension between law's forensic gaze and art's ethical one: both read remains, but only one can tolerate ambiguity.[29] Destruction therefore emerges not as absence, but as attention—a devotional practice of seeing in fragments what power seeks to restore to false wholeness.

II.II Devotion, Ritual, and Sacrifice: Destruction as Ethical Performance

If ruin reveals, ritual clarifies what destruction does. Devotion, in this sense, moves from an ethics of attention into an ethics of performance: bodies, gestures, and materials arranged in acts that refuse utility. Destruction here becomes something closer to sacrifice—not the spectacular punishment Michel Foucault, a French historian and philosopher, locates on the scaffold, but a deliberate expenditure of energy, time, and matter in the Bataillean sense.[30] Artists such as Marina Abramović, a Serbian conceptual artist and performer,[31] and Gustav Metzger, a stateless artist and political activist who developed the concept of Auto-Destructive Art, do not simply destroy; they stage unmaking as truth-telling.[32] Cultural criminology helps illuminate why these moments matter. Destruction becomes an event, an embodied grammar of refusal, vulnerability, and witnessing.[33] Ritual reframes destruction as a practice addressed to an audience: an ethical call made through loss.

Georges Bataille, a French intellectual working within philosophy, literature, sociology, anthropology, and art history, provides the philosophical ground for this argument. In his general economy, value is not generated only through preservation, productivity, or accumulation, but through expenditure, waste, and sacrifice.[34] Life, Bataille argues, produces excess that must be spent, and the sacred appears precisely when something exceeds utility. Sacrifice is therefore not meaningless destruction, but a ritualized expenditure that exposes the limits of rationality and control.[35] Destruction becomes ethical because it interrupts the rule of usefulness. It stages a moment in which value is affirmed through relinquishment

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[29] Ferrell, introduction to *Crimes of Style*, 3-19; Hayward and Presdee, "Opening the Lens: Cultural Criminology and the Image," 1-16.

[30] Michel Foucault, "Docile Bodies," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Penguin Books, 1991), 135-170; Georges Bataille, "Theoretical Introduction," in *An Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, *Volume 1: Consumption* (Zone Books, 1988), 19-44.

[31] Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, 1974, performance, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/abramovic-rhythm-0-t14875.

[32] Gustav Metzger, *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, 1960, print, https://designmanifestos.org/gustav-metzger-auto-destructive-art-manifesto/.

[33] Hayward and Presdee, "Opening the Lens," 1-16.

[34] Bataille, "Theoretical Introduction," 19-44

[35] Bataille, "Theoretical Introduction," 19-44.

rather than possession. In this sense, sacrifice makes the sacred visible: not as transcendence, but as a break in the logic that governs life through calculation.

If Bataille offers the metaphysical language of sacred expenditure, Abramović brings it into flesh. Her performances position the body as a site of ritual offering, making visible the desires, violences, and ethical failures of those who witness and participate.[36] In *Rhythm 0*, Abramović stood motionless for six hours while viewers were invited to use any of seventy-two objects placed before them, including benign items such as a feather and a rose, but also scissors, a knife, and a loaded gun.[37] The body became an object of collective decision, and the performance exposed how quickly spectatorship could turn into domination. The destruction here was relational: co-authored by strangers whose gestures produced a portrait of social violence. Abramović later described herself as a "mirror," a surface upon which the crowd inscribed its desires and cruelties.[38] Across her work, performance becomes a form of devotion: a willingness to be undone so that something otherwise hidden might emerge. Destruction appears not simply as violence, but as vulnerability—an exposure that creates the conditions for ethical seeing.

Where Abramović ritualizes unmaking through bodily exposure, Metzger radicalizes it through political refusal. His auto-destructive art rejects the museum's investment in permanence, mastery, and preservation, insisting instead on fragility, perishability, and disappearance.[39] In works such as *Acid in-Action* 1961, destruction unfolds in real time: the artwork erodes before the viewer, making visible the instability that modern capitalism seeks to deny. Metzger's unmaking is not theatrical excess for its own sake. It is critique. The dissolving material mirrors environmental devastation, militarized technologies, and the fetish for objects that can be owned, stabilized, and traded.[40] Destruction becomes counter-preservation: a refusal to allow art to settle into commodity or comfort. In Metzger's hands, unmaking is a form of political fidelity, a demand that viewers attend to the violences concealed by polished surfaces and institutional care.

Cultural criminology extends this argument by treating destruction not merely as harm, but as performance. Keith Hayward, a professor of criminology in Denmark and Mike Presdee, a sociologist of youth and cultural criminology, argue that acts typically labelled "crime" are often aesthetic events—gestures that create images, intervene in public space,

[36] Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, 1974.

[37] Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, 1974.

[38] Sinéad Gleeson, "'I Only Do Something If I'm Afraid of It, Because That's the Whole Point' – an Interview with Marina Abramović," Royal Academy of Arts, August 24, 2023, https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/marina-abramovic-interview.

[39] Metzger, *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, 1960.

[40] Metzger, *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, 1960.

and generate symbolic meaning.[41] Vandalism, riot damage, graffiti, and monument toppling are communicative refusals that challenge the visual order that policing works to stabilize. Presdee's notion of carnival is especially useful here: destruction becomes ritualized suspension, a moment in which suppressed desires, grievances, and traumas erupt into public visibility.[42] A wall tagged with graffiti, a storefront shattered during protest, or a statue pulled from its pedestal is not simply damaged matter. It is a symbolic strike against what has been made untouchable. Destruction, in this framework, addresses witnesses, cameras, institutions, and the state. It becomes an embodied critique of the normalizing violence embedded in everyday life.

Foucault's account of the scaffold offers the inverse of this devotional destruction. In *Discipline and Punish*, the sovereign state stages the destruction of the criminal body as spectacle, using theatrical violence to produce obedience and reaffirm power.[43] Even when punishment becomes less publicly visible under modern discipline, destruction does not disappear. It is displaced into prisons, bureaucratic routines, and administrative practices that conceal violence behind the language of care, rehabilitation, and order. State destruction stabilizes power; devotional destruction destabilizes it. This distinction matters. Where artistic and communal acts of unmaking seek to expose what power obscures, sovereign destruction aims to manage, silence, and contain.

Taken together, these thinkers reposition destruction as ritual, relation, and revelation. It becomes ethical not because it erases, but because it exposes—hidden violence, suppressed histories, and affective truths that orderly surfaces work to conceal. In this sense, destruction is not the opposite of care, but one of its ritual forms: a way of making visible what can no longer remain intact.

II.III Politics of Erasure and Resistance: Destruction as Counter-Memory

If ritual locates destruction in the body, the politics of erasure return it to the archive. Archives are systems of sanctioned memory: structures that determine what persists and, therefore, who matters. To destroy within such a system is not simply to negate. It is to refuse the moral authority of preservation itself. Gayatri Spivak, an Indian scholar in postcolonial thought, names this refusal as a response to epistemic violence—the structural conditions that determine whose histories are deemed worthy of being recorded.[44] Saidiya Hartman, an American academic and writer focused on Black studies, demonstrates that telling the story

[41] Hayward and Presdee, "Opening the Lens," 1-16.

[42] Mike Presdee and Gavin Carver, "From Carnival to the Carnival of Crime," in *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (Routledge, 2000), 31-56; Mike Presdee, introduction to *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (Routledge, 2000), 1-12.

[43] Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 135-170.

[44] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Macmillan, 1988), 66-111.

of the disappeared often requires undoing the archive's terms.[45] Ariella Azoulay, an author, art curator, and professor at Brown University, goes further, arguing that to unlearn imperialism requires interrupting the archive's classificatory order.[46] Read alongside Foucault and David Garland, an American scholar with work in the sociology of punishment and criminology, destruction emerges as counter-memory: a practice that challenges preservation as a technique of governance.[47] Within legal regimes, as Connely Doizé, an academic, and Thomas Bazley, an American author and academic, demonstrate, the state's devotion to heritage transforms destruction into crime.[48] In this context, unmaking becomes a refusal of state-sanctioned remembrance.

Spivak begins *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) with the impossibility of neutral memory. Her claim that the subaltern cannot speak is not a statement about silence, but about the structures that determine what speech is legible in the first place.[49] The archive operates as a colonial technology: it preserves certain voices in order to rule while erasing others in advance. Erasure is therefore not accidental but structural, an epistemic violence that determines whose histories are allowed to exist. Within this framework, destruction becomes a counter-gesture. To destroy is to interrupt the archive's claim to transparency and neutrality, exposing preservation itself as a mechanism of power. Such acts are not nihilistic; they are reparative. They open the possibility of acknowledging lives that the archive was never designed to remember.

Hartman approaches this problem through narrative practice. In works such as *Venus in Two Acts* and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman describes the archive of slavery as one of violence: a record of injury rather than life.[50] Her method of critical fabulation dismantles the authority of archival narration in order to imagine the lives that official records render invisible. This practice is a form of destructive tenderness. It breaks the forms through which harm is reproduced while creating space for other histories to

[45] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14; Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 1-464.

[46] Ariella Azoulay, "Worldly Sovereignty," in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso Books, 2019), 20-73.

[47] Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 135-170; David Garland, "Modern Criminal Justice and the Penal-Welfare State," in *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 27-52; David Garland, "The Crisis of Penal Modernism," in *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 53-74.

[48] Thomas Bazley, "Vandalism and Malicious Destruction," in *Crimes of the Art World* (Praeger, 2010), 141-156; Thomas Bazley, "Art Theft and Destruction: The Perils of Wars and Civil/Religious Unrest," in *Crimes of the Art World* (Praeger, 2010), 21-49; Connely Doizé, "Destruction, The Rebirth of Art: Analyzing the Right of Integrity's Role in Modern Art" *Journal of Intellectual Property Law* 29, no. 1 (2021), 139-174.

[49] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 66-111.

[50] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 1-14; Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 4-464.

appear. Destruction becomes a condition of care: an ethical willingness to unmake the structures that confine memory in order to imagine life otherwise.

Azoulay radicalizes this argument by reframing the archive itself as an imperial apparatus. In *Potential History*, she argues that preservation is not neutral but colonial: a system that classifies, owns, and stabilizes histories produced through violence.[51] To "unlearn imperialism" requires interrupting these classificatory systems, undoing custodial claims, and releasing images and objects from the regimes that claim authority over them. Archival destruction thus becomes a form of repair. It opens what Azoulay calls "potential history," histories foreclosed by imperial systems of care.[52]

Foucault's concept of biopolitics provides a broader framework for understanding these dynamics. Modern power, he argues, governs not through spectacular destruction but through the management of life and the administration of absence.[53] To make live and let die is to preserve selectively, strategically document, and allow certain populations to disappear through bureaucratic silence.[54] Preservation laws, urban renewal projects, and archival practices all participate in this governance of memory. Erasure becomes administrative: a quiet but pervasive technique of power.

Garland extends this logic into contemporary regimes of criminal justice. In the "culture of control," the state curates social appearance, aggressively managing surfaces of disorder and regulating memory through narratives of risk and responsibility.[55] Acts such as graffiti, monument defacement, or counter-archival interventions become criminal not primarily because they cause harm, but because they disrupt the aesthetic order through which authority is maintained. Policing thus functions not only as legal regulation but as aesthetic governance.

Doizé and Bazley show how law operationalizes this devotion to preservation. Doizé argues for a "right to destroy," exposing heritage law as a defence of state custodianship rather than a neutral protection of culture.[56] Bazley similarly shows that art crime law protects not only objects but the institutional and ideological frames that stabilize artistic

[51] Azoulay, "Worldly Sovereignty," 20-73.

[52] Azoulay, "Worldly Sovereignty," 20-73.

[53] Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 135-170.

[54] Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 135-170.

[55] Garland, "Modern Criminal Justice and the Penal-Welfare State," 27-52; Garland, "The Crisis of Penal Modernsim," 53-74.

[56] Doizé, "Destruction, The Rebirth of Art," 139–74.

meaning.[57] Destruction becomes criminal, then, not simply because it harms objects, but because it threatens the structures that monopolize memory and legitimacy.

These perspectives reposition destruction as counter-memory: a practice that exposes the violence of preservation while opening space for other histories to emerge. Erasure becomes a site of resistance rather than disappearance. To destroy, in this sense, is not to forget but to remember otherwise—to clear space for histories that cannot survive within the archive's moral architecture. Destruction thus becomes an ethical gesture of refusal, a way of making room for memory that the structures of preservation would otherwise foreclose.

III. Friendly Fascism and the Aestheticization of Control

If the politics of erasure reveal how destruction contests memory, friendly fascism shows how power governs through aesthetics itself. In American social scientist and Professor of Political Science Bertram Gross's formulation, contemporary authoritarianism secures obedience not primarily through overt repression but through comfort: a regime of reassurance, smoothness, and visual order that makes domination appear benign.[58] Power operates through surfaces—clean lines, corporate aesthetics, and carefully managed environments that render authority sensible and familiar. Within this system, aesthetics are not decorative but governmental. The visual grammar of order becomes a technology of consent.

Benjamin anticipated this logic when he warned that fascism aestheticizes politics.[59] In this context, political authority increasingly operates through spectacle: choreographed images designed to be admired rather than questioned.[60] Uniforms, rallies, monuments, and media images transform power into something visually coherent and emotionally compelling. What appears beautiful or harmonious invites reverence rather than scrutiny. Destruction becomes dangerous in this environment precisely because it disrupts the image. Rupture interrupts the visual unity through which authoritarian aesthetics sustain themselves.

Guy Debord, a French Marxist theorist, critic, philosopher, and filmmaker, extends this insight by arguing that modern domination operates through spectacle itself.[61] Social relations are increasingly mediated by images, and appearance replaces experience as the

[57] Bazley, "Art Theft and Destruction," 21-49; Bazley, "Vandalism and Malicious Destruction," 141-156.

[58] Bertram Gross, "The Mysterious Establishment," in *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America* (Black Rose Books, 1980) 1-30; Bertram Gross, "The Unfolding Logic," in *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America* (Black Rose Books, 1980), 1-9.

[59] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 217-252.

[60] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 217-252.

[61] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 1-147.

dominant mode of interaction.[62] Citizens become spectators to their own governance. Within this spectacle, smooth circulation and uninterrupted surfaces define the logic of control. Destruction therefore functions not simply as damage but as interruption. A cracked monument, a slashed canvas, or a graffiti-covered wall disrupts the seamless flow of representation and forces attention back to the material conditions beneath it.

Mark Fisher, an English writer and political and cultural theorist, describes the affective dimension of this system through the concept of capitalist realism.[63] In contemporary neoliberal environments, aesthetic surfaces operate as forms of emotional management. Corporate interiors, transit hubs, and branded environments generate a low-intensity atmosphere of calm that narrows the field of political imagination. Power becomes ambient and atmospheric, integrated into everyday sensory experience. In such a context, destruction becomes politically volatile because it disrupts this managed calm. It breaks the mood of inevitability and exposes the constructed nature of social order.

Seen in this light, friendly fascism operates as a visual, affective, and participatory regime built upon smoothness and spectacle. Destruction threatens this order not because it is inherently violent, but because it reveals the violence embedded within aesthetic harmony. To destroy, in this sense, is to make visible what power works to keep beautifully intact.

IV. Case Studies: Devotional Justice in Practice

If the previous sections traced destruction as an aesthetic, ethical, and political logic, the following cases ground these ideas in concrete practices of unmaking. Each work treats destruction—of bodies, surfaces, institutions, or monuments—not as negation but as fidelity: a way of attending to what has been silenced, erased, or disavowed. In different registers, these artists and movements refuse the authority of permanence. They insist that truth appears at the moment of rupture, when the wound reveals what polished surfaces conceal. In cultural criminology's terms, each performs a transgression of visual order, violating the state's curatorial fantasy of stability.[64] Yet these acts do not aim at annihilation; they enact what I call devotional justice: the ethical labour of caring through unmaking.

Cuban-American performance artist, sculptor, painter and video artist Ana Mendieta's earth-body works, particularly the *Silueta* series (1973–80), stage destruction as disappearance.[65] Mendieta inscribed the outline of her body into landscapes—mud, sand, grass, or fire—leaving only a temporary trace that wind, water, and time would eventually

[62] Griselda Pollock, "Art/Trauma/Representation," *Parallax* 15, no. 1 (2009): 40–54.

[63] Mark Fisher, "It's Easier to Imagine the End of the World than the End of Capitalism," in *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 1-12.

[64] Ferrell, introduction to *Crimes of Style*, 3-19; Hayward and Presdee, "Opening the Lens," 1-16.

[65] Ana Mendieta, *Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance*, 1972-85, performance, https://www.drainmag.com/contentNOVEMBER/REVIEWS_INTERVIEWS/Ana_Mendieta_Review.htm.

erase. The disappearance is not a failure of the work but its central meaning. As Jane Blocker, an American Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory, argues, Mendieta's vanishing body refuses the archival logic of the museum and the fantasy of permanence.[66] Her works assert an ethics of impermanence in which destruction becomes testimony: a gesture toward exile, displacement, and histories that official archives cannot contain. In this sense, the *Siluetas* function as counter-archives, remembering through erasure rather than preservation.

Where Mendieta allows disappearance to unfold slowly, Metzger accelerates destruction into spectacle. His auto-destructive art, particularly the acid-on-nylon demonstrations of the 1960s, stages material dissolution in real time.[67] Sheets of nylon dissolve under acid, transforming decay into a public event. Metzger's manifesto frames destruction as both aesthetic and political: a refusal of capitalist values of permanence, ownership, and accumulation.[68] The dissolving artwork mirrors the technological and ecological violence of modernity. Destruction here is not chaos but critique—a demand that viewers confront the slow violences hidden beneath the smooth surfaces of everyday life.

Japanese artist, musician, activist and filmmaker Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) shifts destruction into the realm of social ritual.[69] Sitting motionless onstage, Ono invited audience members to cut pieces of clothing from her body. The act distributed violence among the spectators, transforming destruction into collective participation.[70] As Peggy Phelan, an American feminist scholar, notes, the performance exposes the ethical dynamics of spectatorship, revealing how vulnerability invites both care and aggression.[71] Each cut becomes both wound and revelation, exposing the social structures that shape spectators' responses. The destruction of the garment becomes a record of complicity.

Columbian visual artist and sculptor Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2007) moves this logic to the institutional scale. The massive crack carved into the floor of Tate Modern's Turbine Hall disrupted the museum's polished surface, transforming the gallery itself into a wound.[72] The fissure forced viewers to confront histories of racialization and exclusion

[66] Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile* (Duke University Press, 1999), 1-165.

[67] Metzger, *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, 1960.

[68] Metzger, *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, 1960.

[69] Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964, performance, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York, https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/15/373.

[70] Ono, *Cut Piece,* 1964.

[71] Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1996), 146-166.

[72] Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2007, Fissure carved into concrete, Tate Modern, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/salcedo-shibboleth-iv-p20337.

embedded within the museum's authority.[73] Rather than defacing the institution, Salcedo exposed its hidden fractures. The crack became a form of forensic evidence, revealing the violence that institutional surfaces conceal.

Finally, political movements such as *Rhodes Must Fall* extend devotional destruction into the political sphere.[74] The toppling or defacement of colonial monuments interrupts the aesthetic continuity of state-sanctioned history. Though often labelled vandalism,[75] such acts function as counter-memory, challenging the authority of heritage and demanding that public spaces no longer commemorate oppression. Monument removal becomes a collective ritual through which historical violence is confronted rather than preserved.

Across these cases, destruction appears not as annihilation but as attention. Mendieta disappears to honour the disappeared;[76] Metzger dissolves material to expose systemic violence;[77] Ono stages vulnerability to reveal complicity;[78] Salcedo fractures the museum to expose institutional harm;[79] and monument-toppling movements unmake statues to remake memory.[80] In each case, destruction operates as devotion: fidelity to histories and truths that cannot remain intact.

V. Conclusion: After the Ruin

I have argued that destruction in artistic and aesthetic contexts cannot be understood solely as negation, deviance, or senseless violence. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, affect theory, and cultural criminology, it has reframed destruction as devotional attention: an ethical orientation toward what resists preservation, mastery, and institutional containment. Whether enacted by artists who unmake their own work or by actors criminalized as vandals, destructive gestures expose the fragile boundaries through which value, legitimacy, and care are organized under neoliberal modernity.

Reframing destruction as devotion does not romanticize harm. Rather, it unsettles familiar binaries—order and disorder, care and crime, creation and destruction—and asks

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[73] Pollock, "Art/Trauma/Representation," 40-54.

[74] Rodger Bosch, *Students Attack the Defaced Statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town*, April 9, 2015, photograph, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/nov/18/why-south-african-students-have-turned-on-their-parents-generation.

[75] Bosch, *Students Attack the Defaced Statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town,* 2015.

[76] Mendieta, *Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance,* 1972-85.

[77] Metzger, *Auto-Destructive Art Manifesto*, 1960.

[78] Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1964.

[79] Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, 2007.

[80] Bosch, *Students Attack the Defaced Statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town*, 2015.

what kinds of rupture become legible as meaningful. The slashed canvas, defaced monument, disappearing artwork, or cracked institutional surface each reveals the unequal distribution of legitimacy: whose unmaking is sanctified as art, and whose is punished as crime. Destruction, then, is not simply an endpoint. It is a diagnostic practice that exposes the values and violence embedded in what societies choose to preserve. To remain with ruin is to recognize that care does not always take the form of repair. Sometimes, it takes the form of undoing.

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